

We Become What We Worship

Is there a way of eliminating emotions? Can reason be made to dominate the individual rather than emotion? Can reason guide the emotions? Can we get our emotions to change direction? Some method must be found to bring about harmony within the personality. Modern psychologists are still struggling with this problem, while theistic religion is praying to God for help. Mankind continues to suffer due to an inability to gain control over emotions. To make things worse, mankind, in confusion, worships emotionality and excitement. They even confuse emotionality with humanity, thinking that emotion is necessary to be human. However, emotion is not what distinguishes the human being from the animal but the ability to reason.

The right sense of values is the appreciation of what is good, pleasant, and real. What is good, pleasant, and real is tranquility, and tranquility is NIRVĀNA. Therefore, the right sense of values is the appreciation of “*Nirvāṇa*”.

Knowing Good and Bad Behavior

Behavior is of three kinds: thought, speech and action. Bad behavior is that which leads to the unhappiness of oneself as well as that of others. Good behavior is what leads to happiness of oneself and others. This is based on a consideration of not only for oneself but also for others.

There are ten kinds of bad behavior enumerated by the Buddha, three of bodily action, four of speech, and three of thought:

Acts of body:

1. Hurting or harming others
2. Taking other's property without consent
3. Sexual misbehavior, which is improper.

Acts of speech:

1. Dishonesty in speech
2. Discourteous speech
3. Harmful speech in another's absence
4. Irresponsible speech that spoils others minds.

Acts of thought:

1. Desire for others property
2. Hatred of others
3. Harmful views that lead to bad behavior.

One who worships the Buddha avoids these 10 bad behaviors and cultivates their opposites, the good behaviors.

To worship (worth + ship) is to regard something to be of great worth, or to hold in high esteem. This is why the Buddhist worships the Buddha, the “Awakened One,” but does not pray to the Buddha. A Buddhist does not pray to supernatural powers for help but takes refuge in the Wisdom of the Buddha to solve the problems in his/her life. To take refuge is to seek protection from the troubles and tribulations of life. In taking refuge in the Buddha, he/she takes refuge in the teachings, “*Dhamma*”.

The Buddha is comparable to the God of theistic religions, but because Buddhism is humanistic, the term “God” takes on a different meaning from that in theistic religion. “God,” in the Buddhist sense, is the state of perfection, which one worships and takes refuge in. For the Buddhist then, God is not the Creator of the world, but the Savior of the world, the Buddha. The Buddha saves the world, not through supernatural power, but through natural wisdom

To seek refuge in the Buddha is to seek refuge in oneself and human intelligence. It is not seeking refuge in power – natural or supernatural. It is seeking refuge in the natural wisdom of the Buddha, which is humanly verifiable. Buddhism is also the worship of goodness rather than power. We seek power to control others and our circumstances. We seek wisdom to control ourselves, which turns into goodness. Buddhism helps us solve problems through self-transformation, not through the transformation of the world. This is how Buddhism differs from both theistic religions and Marxism, which seek refuge in power, either supernatural or natural, to control circumstances.

Buddhist worship is not, as some intellectuals think, a meaningless ritual or ceremony practiced by less intellectual individuals. It can become so, however, only if done without understanding. Worship is in fact a very meaningful psychological exercise, essential in becoming a Buddhist.

Worship and Prayer

Buddhists do not pray to the Buddha but worship the Buddha. Prayer is adoration, confession, supplication or thanks giving. Worship (worth + ship), on the other hand, is to show great respect, reverence, or admiration; it is to highly esteem or hold in high regard. It is to recognize the greatness or superiority of the Buddha who represents the ideal of perfection in concrete form. This worship is a psychological exercise to develop “*Saddhā*”, (appreciation of goodness), the Buddhist sense of values, which gives a new direction to life.

The purpose of Buddhist worship is to get one moving in the right direction. The idea is that we move in the direction of what we consider is superior, worthy or worthwhile. We become like the person we admire, appreciate and constantly visualize as worthy.

Buddhist worship is a kind of hero worship, which is to look upon some person with great admiration. If we admire or worship the right kind of heroes we move in the right direction. If we worship and admire criminals, we tend to become criminals ourselves. If we worship and admire saints, on the other hand, we tend to become saints ourselves. This is why there is value in reading the biographies of great men. Buddhists read the biography of the Buddha for inspiration. The basic principle is “we become what we worship.” We become the ideal we worship. Buddhists are not “idol” worshippers but “ideal” worshippers.

This worship is, therefore, a psychological exercise to re-orient the mind toward the new goal. It is meditation at the devotional level. Buddhist worship is the harmonious aspiration to attain the state of perfection called Buddha.

The Use of Images

Tranquility is achieved partly by relaxation of the body and partly by holding good images in the mind. The best image to hold in the mind is the image of the Buddha. The body of the Buddha is not present today to behold, we can only imagine the Buddha as a person who is perfectly calm and relaxed. We can also look at a well-painted picture of the Buddha or a statue of the Buddha that depicts the peaceful serenity of the Buddha. We could also imagine the “*Dhamma*” as the teaching about tranquility of mind and relaxation of body.

The use of images in Buddhist worship has been subject to criticism by those who think it is wrong to “idolize images.” These criticisms are based on ignorance. The image of the Buddha is only an external representation of an internal mental image. The external image helps us to produce the internal image and the feeling associated with it.

We all use images in our lives quite unconsciously, and sometimes to our disadvantage. Even those who think they can do without images cannot help being influenced by them. The Chinese say, “One picture is worth ten thousand words.” Modern advertisers know this very well and use images to their advantage. Television has become the most powerful of mass media today because of the power of images over the human mind. Buddhists use images to their advantage.

It is quite natural for human beings to use images. Why are great national monuments and statues built? Why do people pay thousands of dollars for paintings and sculpture? Why do people buy cameras? What is a photograph if not an image? If images were not of any value, could the camera industry be so prosperous today? Why do lovers treasure photographs of their sweethearts if an image has no meaning for them? Buddhists are not so naive as to think that statues have life in them. They only use them as symbols. Statues, like any sculpture, painting or music, express certain ideas. Critics themselves use symbols all the time when they are speaking, writing, or even thinking. They too worship images when they consciously or unconsciously worship heroes and magnates of various kinds.

Other Significant Practices

Buddhist worship consists of appreciation, offerings, recitations, silent meditation, sharing of goodness and aspiration. Each part of this worship has a very important psychological meaning and purpose.

What we appreciate we tend to become. To appreciate is to value, to esteem, to hold in high regard, or consider being superior. When one appreciates Nirvana, one holds it in high esteem and considers it to be superior. Nirvana is the mental state of perfection attained to by the Buddha. Therefore to esteem Nirvana is to esteem the Buddha. The teaching of the Buddha is an explanation of Nirvana and the way to it. Therefore to esteem Nirvana is also to hold the “*Dhamma*” in high esteem.

The appreciation or admiration helps cultivate humility and begins the initiate on the path. The admiration is a conscious recognition of the greatness of the state of Buddha and the admission of one’s own inferiority in relation to that state. This humbling of oneself to the Buddha not only helps cultivate humility but also makes one aware of one’s position on the ladder of progress

This is not an obsessive, fanatic dwelling on ones state of inferiority; it is the healthy admiration and appreciation of the superiority of the state of goodness, happiness and realism attained by the Buddha. This recognition of the greatness of the attainment of the Buddha gives us hope and self-confidence to work toward the transcendence of our state of inadequacy and recognizes the future possibilities. It spurs one towards the superior state, the development of human potential.

Buddhists do not look upon themselves as sinners and helpless weaklings before a superior, all-powerful, supernatural being who can never be equaled by anyone. They believe that every man can reach the state of perfection reached by the Buddha. The admiration is a recognition and appreciation of the state of perfection reached by the Buddha and an aspiration to attain that same state.

The various kinds of offerings made to the Buddha are also symbolic expressions of the feeling of appreciation “*Saddhā*”. The offering of light, which symbolizes wisdom, is a way of honoring the enlightenment of the Buddha. The offering of incense, which symbolizes virtue, is to honor the Buddha’s virtues. Flowers represent the pleasures of the world, which are transient, and their offering represents the sacrifice of the worldliness in favor of the inner peace of NIRVANA. The offering of food represents our show of gratitude to the Buddha for giving us his teaching, even though what we give is not worth even a millionth part of what he gave us, the miracle of the “*Dhamma*”. These offerings are not made to please the Buddha or to receive favors from the Buddha. They all help develop “*Saddhā*” or appreciation of the greatness of the Buddha.

All other parts of the worship such as recitations and meditation also help cultivate “*Saddhā*”. Recitations or chants are only verbal expressions of one’s appreciation of the Buddha and the “*Dhamma*”. Meditations are mental expressions of one’s appreciation. The sharing of merits and aspiration are really practices consequential to appreciation. Because we appreciate the goal of perfection, our mind is purified by that thought, and we share this purity with others who value goodness and tranquility. We also aspire to reach the state of perfection because we appreciate it, and we encourage others to do the same.